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ABSTRACT

Based on people's implicit expectations about how high and low self-monitors will present themselves, it was hypothesized that observers would be able to infer dispositional characteristics of the two personality types from their clothing preferences. To test this hypothesis, prototypical wardrobes were empirically constructed for the high and low self-monitors based on their actual preferences and, independently, on assessments of perceptions of the wardrobes and inferences about the person who would wear the clothing. College students (N=68) viewed slides of both wardrobes and rated each wardrobe and the characteristics of the person who would wear the clothes on 7-point scales selected for their relevance to self-monitoring behavior. The results revealed that, from the wardrobes alone, subjects distinguished important behavioral characteristics of high and low self-monitors consistent with predictions from the self-monitoring theory. (Author/NB)

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Can You Tell A Self-Monitor By What She Wears?

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Abstract

Based on people's implicit expectations about how high and low self-monitors will present themselves, we hypothesized that observers would be able to infer dispositional characteristics of the two personality types from their clothing preferences. We produced slides of prototypical wardrobes for the high and low self-monitor based on their actual preferences and, independently, we assessed perceptions of the wardrobes and inferences about the person who would wear the clothing. From the wardrobes alone, subjects distinguished important behavioral characteristics of high and low self-monitors consistent with predictions from self-monitoring theory.

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Can You Tell A Self-Monitor By What She Wears?

Despite the intuitive appeal of the self-monitoring construct and the sheer quantity of research it has inspired (see Snyder, 1987), investigators have raised questions about its validity and measurement (e.g., Briggs & Cheek, in press; Briggs, Cheek & Buss, 1980; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). While academic researchers assess self-monitoring with instruments that have been subjected to sophisticated factor analyses, most people have access neither to a laboratory nor to the self-monitoring scales themselves (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985; Snyder, 1974). Yet, research indicates that people have implicit theories about the nature of self-monitoring (Larkin, 1986, 1987a, 1987b), implicit theories which correspond closely with the dimensions of self-monitoring uncovered through formal measurement procedures. This study further explores the implicit theories approach, assessing whether people have implicit expectations about what high and low self-monitors will wear when they present themselves in public. In short, relying only on direct observation, can people identify self-monitors from the clothing they wear?

There is reason to believe that high and low self-monitors' clothing may indeed provide cues for recognition of their dispositions by others. Given the importance of appearance to high self-monitors, and the manifold opportunities for them to alter their projected image through clothing choice, we would expect high and low self-monitors to reveal their different motivational characteristics through their wardrobes. Consistent with self-monitoring theory (Snyder, 1974), high self-monitors, who are skilled at controlling their self-presentation, may possess a relatively large and diverse wardrobe while low self-monitors would have a more homogeneous and internally consistent wardrobe. There is tenuous evidence that this is the case for men but no empirical support with respect to women's clothing behavior (Snyder, 1987).

In this study we empirically constructed prototypical wardrobes for the

high and low self-monitor based on their actual preferences and, independently, we assessed perceptions of the wardrobes and inferences about the person who would wear the clothing. It was hypothesized that if high and low self-monitors express their personality differences through their clothing preferences, observers should be able to infer dispositional characteristics on the basis of the wardrobes alone.

Method

Subjects Subjects were 68 student volunteers (37 males, 31 females) from the introductory psychology subject pool.

Materials In order to create wardrobes consistent with self-monitoring orientation, it was necessary to identify items of clothing differentially preferred by high and low self-monitors. In previous work Pines (1983; Pines & Kuczkowski, 1987; Pines & Roll, 1984) has shown that people have self-schema or mental representations of the clothing they typically wear. Therefore, in a pilot study, we asked 34 female college students to rate 75 slides of clothing items on a 9-point scale measuring the degree to which each item was "me" or "not me." Based on the mean ratings and the correlation between their self-monitoring scores (previously obtained) and "me-ness" ratings, we constructed a high and low self-monitoring wardrobe, each containing eight clothing items. All items chosen for the two wardrobes had "me-ness" ratings that were significantly correlated (positively and negatively) with self-monitoring score ($ps < .02$), while the overall "me-ness" ratings of the two wardrobes were equivalent, $t < 1$, ns.

Procedure Subjects in four group sessions viewed slides of both wardrobes and rated each wardrobe and the characteristics of the person who would wear the clothes on 7-point scales (see below) selected for their relevance to self-monitoring behavior. Before making any ratings they saw both entire wardrobes. Each set of slides was then shown again (5 seconds per slide) and subjects rated the wardrobe immediately after the second showing. Wardrobe order was counterbalanced across groups.

Results The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial with sex of subject and self-monitoring score (based on a median split) as between variables and wardrobe as a within variable. A multivariate analysis of variance revealed no main effects of sex or subject's self-monitoring score, but a significant main effect for the within variable of wardrobe, $F = 13.39$, $p < .0009$). The interactions were not significant. T-tests (df=67, ps <.001) performed on ratings of the two wardrobes showed the high self-monitoring wardrobe to be significantly more attention-getting, sophisticated, formal, and less conservative than the low self-monitoring wardrobe. Subjects also rated it as more fit for an extravert than an introvert, for an active than quiet social life, more likely to be worn to impress others than to express oneself, and more projective of a poised and self-confident image than the low self-monitoring wardrobe. No differences were found in the appropriateness of the two wardrobes for different situations with different people.

Subjects also rated the characteristics of the person who would wear each set of clothes. They perceived the low self-monitor as significantly more sincere and able to be trusted than the high self-monitor, while the high self-monitor was more theatrical, wealthier, ambitious, socially skilled, and concerned about how she comes across to others. They rated themselves equally similar to the owners of the two wardrobes but liked the high self-monitoring wardrobe better.

Discussion

As valuable as our sophisticated measurement techniques are, it is nonetheless true that most personality evaluation occurs on an informal basis. In this study we examined the assessment of self-monitoring in everyday life using the pictorial stimuli of clothing to validate the construct. Without benefit of self-monitoring scales, individuals distinguished important behavioral characteristics of high and low self-monitors based on clothing preference. Many of their inferences were consistent with people's implicit theories about

self-monitoring (e.g., Larkin, 1987b) and with results found in personality assessment of self-monitors (e.g., Funder & Harris, 1986).

Although pilot data indicated that high and low self monitors react similarly to many clothing items, and strong social norms for appropriateness undoubtedly would overcome personality preferences in many situations, nevertheless there is sufficient latitude in wardrobe selection for people to reveal internal dispositions. Seeking links between personality and social behavior, Snyder and DeBono (1987) suggest that the attitudes of high self-monitors may serve a social adjustive function while low self-monitors' attitudes may serve a value expressive function. In view of continued concern about the validity of the self-monitoring construct, future research might do well to examine clothing as an attitude object for what it may reveal about motivational differences between high and low self-monitors.

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